

**Statement of  
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United States Department of Agriculture**

**Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition, and  
Forestry  
Committee on Agriculture  
United States House of Representatives**

**on**

**June 6, 2002**

**Concerning  
Public Safety Concerns and Forest Management Hurdles in the Black  
Hills National Forest**

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to appear before you today. I am John Twiss, Forest Supervisor of the Black Hills National Forest. I am here today to add the field manager's perspective to our discussion about public safety concerns and forest management hurdles in the Black Hills National Forest.

The Black Hills National Forest, located in southwestern South Dakota and eastern Wyoming, is comprised of 1.2 million acres of national forest system land. It is one of the most healthy national forests in the nation. The water is clean; fish and wildlife populations are diverse and plentiful; the soils are rich and stable; and plant communities are diverse. The esthetics are profound and evoke countless positive comments from the four million people who visit the Forest each year.

The Black Hills National Forest is also one of the most productive forests in the nation, grazing 23,000 cattle annually; producing 73 million board feet of timber annually for the last decade; permitting more than 800 special uses for marinas, summer homes, and ski areas; and maintaining 5,000 miles of system roads for recreation use and Forest administration. Forest annual revenues have averaged \$14 million over the last five years with 25% of these funds returned to 7 counties in South Dakota and Wyoming.

While this information is interesting, I wish to explain my concerns today as they relate to recent trends of reduced vegetative management (thinning and timber harvesting), and the effects on forest health and public safety. Litigation and excessive analysis has slowed our ability to thin the forest and protect individual private property and communities. Beaver Park and the Norbeck Wildlife Preserve are two areas of the Black

Hills National Forest that have been of great concern to me because they are overgrown (Norbeck) or infested with pine beetles resulting in thousands of dead and dying trees (Beaver Park). This condition and three years of drought, combined with the close proximity to communities, private property and municipal watersheds, spurred the Forest to call all litigants together in an attempt to break the gridlock so that vegetative treatments could take place. So far, we have not succeeded.

Let me conclude by saying that although the Forest has experienced the four largest forest fires in Black Hills recorded history in 2000 and 2001 which burned 120,000 acres and with the exception of the 40,000 acres in Beaver Park and Norbeck, I do not regard the Forest to be in a high risk fire condition. The Forest, for the most part, is well thinned and with National Fire Plan funding we are treating fuel loading around communities and other private inholdings rapidly. However, I am concerned about our ability to continue future timber harvesting and thinning.

Thank you for your time. This concludes my statement and I will be happy to answer any questions that you might have.